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A Rising Tide: The Growing Role of Women in the Atlantic Labour Force

Over the past three decades, the role of women in the Atlantic labour force has grown substantially. In 2008, 59% of women (15 years and over) participated in Atlantic Canada's labour force, up from 38% in 1976. In contrast, the participation rate for men, although higher at 68%, has remained relatively constant since the early 1990s. This has led to a substantial narrowing of the gap between men and women in terms of their engagement in the paid labour force. Although the overall participation rate for women in Atlantic Canada still lags behind the national level of 63%, female participation has risen faster in Atlantic Canada (with the biggest jump in Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland and Labrador) and now matches the Canadian rate of 83% among the 25-44 age group. The female participation rate in Prince Edward Island is the second-highest in the country behind Alberta.

The steady increase in female labour force participation can be attributed to a combination of factors, including the dominant role which the service sector plays in new job creation (92% of Atlantic Canadian women now work in services), lifestyle changes among women, and the adaptation of the workplace to the needs of female workers. New employment opportunities are encouraging more young women to invest in post-secondary education: female students now make up 60% of enrolment at Maritime universities.

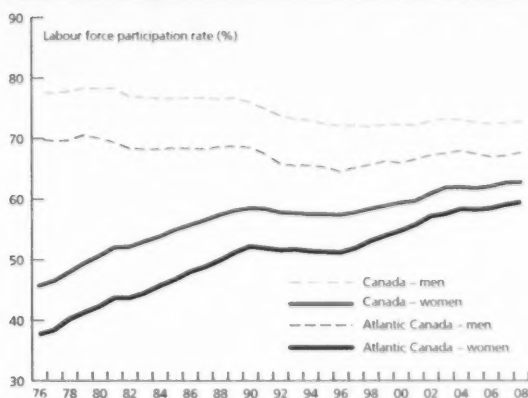
Women currently account for almost half of total employment in the Atlantic region. Is that proportion likely to increase further? There is some evidence to suggest that the increase in the number of female workers may be reaching a plateau: the increase in the participation rate for Atlantic women in the 25-44 age group has

slowed in the last five years. On a proportional basis, however, the female share of the Atlantic labour force may continue to rise, in part depending on the severity of the current recession and its impact on male employment. In the previous recession of the early 1990s, it was men who suffered the greatest losses in employment: it was not until 2000 (a total of 11 years) that male employment in Atlantic Canada matched the level attained in 1989. In contrast, Atlantic female employment increased by 16% over this period. A similar situation may be occurring in this recession: job losses since August 2008 have been concentrated in sectors such as manufacturing where male employees are more prevalent. To date in this recession, the unemployment rate has been increasing faster for males than females.

Growth by Sector

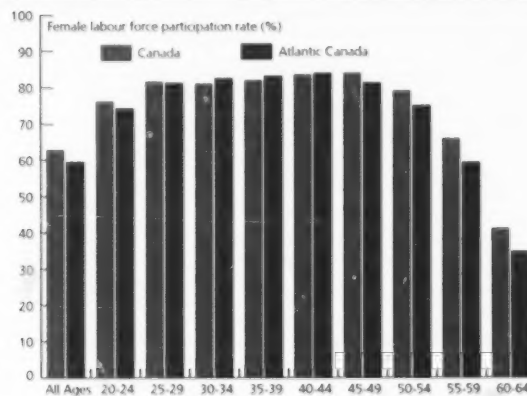
Although women in Atlantic Canada have expanded their presence in almost all industries over the last thirty years, the largest gains have been in public administration and business services. Women now account for half of all public sector employees in Atlantic Canada. Employment equity initiatives have made a difference: the Nova Scotia government for example, now requires all departments to develop an employment equity plan. The increase in business services can partly be explained by the growth in call centres. Women account for the majority of job growth in business services in New Brunswick, and now represent 56% of total employment in that sector.

Large Rise In Female Labour Force Participation



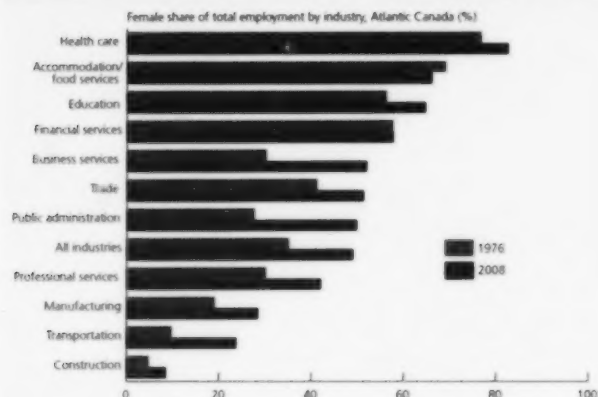
Source: Statistics Canada.

Atlantic Female Participation Rate Matches Canada For Ages 25-44



Source: Statistics Canada.

Atlantic Canadian Women Increase Role in Most Industries



Source: Statistics Canada.

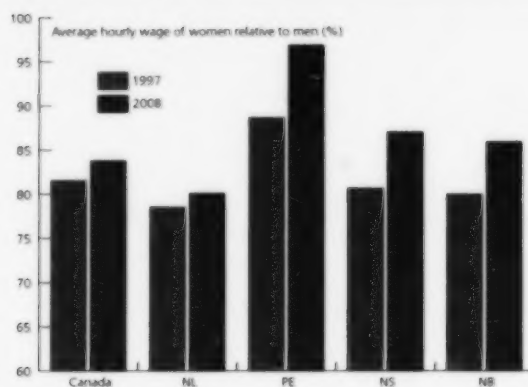
Female employees continue to be in the majority in fields such as health care, accommodation and food services, education and financial services. The fast-growing health care and the retail sectors are by far the largest employers of women in Atlantic Canada, representing 40% of total female employment. Other industries which have seen notable increases in female participation include transportation (24% of workers in Atlantic Canada's transportation sector are women currently, compared with only 10% in 1976) and professional services (increasing from 30% to 42% over this period).

Women in Atlantic Canada have also increased their penetration of management positions at a relatively fast pace over the last decade. According to the 2006 Census, women in Atlantic Canada now make up 39% of managers, slightly higher than the 37% share nationally. However, female managers are largely concentrated within sectors that have a large percentage of female workers, such as health care. Women account for only 30% of senior management in the Atlantic region, and only 18% of senior managers in the private sector, although this is up from 13% in 1996.

Hours and Wages

Women now account for 45% of the full-time workforce in the region, up from 30% in 1976. However, women are still much more likely than men to work part-time, with 23% of women holding part-time jobs compared to 10% of men. While some are working part-time as a matter of choice (to accommodate child care or elder-care responsibilities), others would prefer to work full-time.

Wage Gap Between Women and Men Narrowing



Source: Statistics Canada.

According to the Labour Force Survey, 29% of Atlantic women were working part-time on an involuntary basis compared to the national rate of 22%.

The limited opportunities for full-time work can negatively affect access to job benefits and employment insurance for women. The high concentration of women within lower-wage industries such as accommodation and food services and low-wage occupations also has a large impact on female earnings. According to the Labour Force Survey, women in Atlantic Canada earn about \$16.70 per hour, about 86% of the \$19.51 per hour that men earn. This wage gap has narrowed slightly from 80% in 1997, reflecting factors such as structural changes in the economy, pay equity provisions and increased unionization. There are now more female union members in Atlantic Canada than male.

Conclusion

As the baby boom generation retires, employers will be increasingly looking to women to meet their labour requirements. Can new initiatives bring even more women into the workforce? Employment equity programs have clearly made a difference in the public sector, and some jurisdictions are going even further, notably Quebec where female participation has increased by 7%, compared to 5% nationally since the introduction of a provincial daycare system in 1997. However women still face a challenge in gaining access to segments of the labour force – the private sector in Atlantic Canada in particular needs to rise to the challenge and take proactive steps to increase the pool of women in senior management.

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